

# #1 4-2-80

Tue, Jul 23, 2024 9:46AM 43:49

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

father, recall, impressed, people, family, learned, italian, mother, lived, remember, seventh avenue, talking, behringer, neighborhood, holy communion, school, suppose, democratic, newark, sister

## SPEAKERS

Gordon Bishop, Peter Rodino

---

**G** Gordon Bishop 00:05  
When I asked the question you can,

**P** Peter Rodino 00:07  
if I don't get, you know, the full import of the question, you know, he'll get back to me, you know, I've got I've had some people now doing. As matter of fact, I guess you'll be getting back again an oral history and Columbia University and they're probing and broken and probing.

**G** Gordon Bishop 00:26  
Now you can begin the narration by telling us what your father did what your mother did in your early youth in Newark.

**P** Peter Rodino 00:37  
My father came over a rather early from Italy, probably in his teens and, uh, I recall his telling me that he came over with an identification tag. And, of course, having no one here, no relative whatsoever except the person, probably a friend of the family who lived at that that time in New York who received him and who accompanied him to Newark, New Jersey. A fellow whom my father was always grateful to and whose name I remember is Paul, and my father being a young man having nobody wondering where he might earn his livelihood found a place of employment with a leather factory. At that time, I don't remember the name of the leather factory, but I do know it was situated somewhere down in the so called down neck of Newark. My father worked there for a period of time alone. And, and then sometime later, married, married my mother. And I believe it was then to that he got himself a job with a high out roller bearing industry, High Roller Bearing Company, which was in Harrison, part of General Motors. My father's name was Pellegrino Rodino. But Pellegrino is too difficult to pronounce for some of the friends and neighbors. And those of course, who were Native Americans who didn't

understand Italian. So he was named Peter and they call him Pete. And that's why I am a Peter, although my name on my birth certificate was Pellegrino, Pellegrino Rodino. My mother, her name was Margaret, and he married her, oh, I guess that was way back. Because my mother who died in the year 1914 was only a young lady when she died, about 28 years old. And by that time, we, we were a family of five myself, my sister Ann and my brother, Pat who was the very youngest member of the family. It was, of course, not easy going for a man who only spoke Italian and who had no one but my father made his way. And my recollection is that as I grew up, in that area, he'd won many friends, in the so called Old First Ward of Newark, Little Italy, as it was called, and Little Italy, and that particular neighborhood that I came from had many of our relatives there. Although my father, as I said, didn't have any relatives at all, but my mother had a sister and, and my mother's sister, had married into a family, the Girard family, and they were many. And we lived in a tenement house on Seventh Avenue in Newark, near Cutler Street, which is no longer there. It was now there is, well, there used to be a bank there now, the old the old bank is gone too. And the that area that particular section is, is a vacant lot. And this tenement that I'm talking about was across the street from the rectory of St. Lucy's, which was the National Italian parish, Catholic parish. I actually, of course, had been born on a place called of all places, Factory Street, which was in that immediate vicinity too and I recall this because my father told me of Factory Street, which was just one block up and Factory Street was adjacent then to Seventh Avenue School. Getting back we, we, during my early childhood, which I recall, lived on, on Seventh Avenue, went to school at McKinley. Then Seventh Avenue School later called McKinley School, which was right across the street, right across the street. And we grew up in that environment. My father, hard working, very industrious, you know, very, very talented, very talented individual, who, except for the fact that he hadn't had any real formal education because, as he told me, he was one of the seven brothers, but all the others had died and his sister was alive and still in Italy, at this time, and with her mother, and my, my father, of course, had not developed any formal education or any trade of any sort. But then working with General Motors. He showed a great talent as a toolmaker. He was innovative. He used to, he used to do woodcarvings, wood cuttings, he used to do sculpturing. We have some few pieces, I remember that my father and now this is, again, going back my father also was able to do my mother's tombstone and the monument I remember some of the wood cuttings that some of the people in the neighborhood got and one in particular, the family doctor who liked it so much that my father presented it to him, to him, it was a wood cutting, showing a stream and a bridge over it, you know, and I always wondered whether or not I couldn't retrieve that, but, you know, these things are gone. And then my father, I recall, was so handy, you know, and had such imagination, that he tried to develop through his inventive mind, you know, something a clock that would run forever, you know, perpetual motion. Yeah. And he showed me, you know, how he was doing this with a water clock. And as a matter of fact, I, I recall that during the Christmas season, when my father would again, with this great talent, he would prepare a bucolic scene, you know, scene of the Nativity, you know, and he'd have streams and he'd have the little trains running and the little animals you know, and the scene of the Nativity, you know, and I always wondered how my father kept that water going, you know, and it was that he was working on this perpetual motion idea of his and this wasn't, of course, unique to me, because I knew that my father in the, in the courtyard of this tenement that we lived in, had built a tool shed, and he had in there all sorts of tools and, and there is where he would do his work, you know, and when we needed shoes to be repaired, my father would act as a cobbler, you know, and I'll never forget the leather apron and putting them putting them this, uh, iron, you know, on his lap, and then putting the nails in his mouth, you know, and then with the hammer just hammering away and preparing for us, oh my god, as I recall it during the snow storms, you know, some leggins(?) and stuff of that sort. Very, very innovative, you know, and well, you know, I regret to say that I'm all thumbs when it comes to anything, anything that's mechanical, I just haven't, I just

haven't learned. There was one thing that my father of course, also had a talent, I think he was able to think things out and tried to write. And I think that this was something that I really seem to inherit, you know, from him, because from early on, I began to feel that I wanted to write, you know, and this was my fa- what my father said to me about things, those things were inspirational to me, and I tried my hand at writing, you know, thinking first and writing, you know, and I think at a very early age, I tried writing and tried writing poetry and some prose and became impressed with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and his tale of the Ancient Mariner, you know, and oh, yes, all of those, you know, and, and then went on, I recall, there was a doctor who had apparently quite a library and when he moved out of the premises, he left some books behind. Some of them were some books of prose and poetry and I, I got deep into those and began, you know, to get a real feel and felt a, a, a deep yearning that I had to write, you know, write some of the things that I felt, and I tried my hand and kept it up, you know, nothing spectacular, but I was, I would say that at about 12, 13, 14, I was doing little pieces, trying my hand, probably it was all doggerel, you know, but I tried to mimic the poets, you know, and then came on to Shakespeare, and I think when I got to be about 16, 17, 18, I probably had committed to memory. I don't know how much of Shakespeare, but I did. And

G

Gordon Bishop 12:40

How was your education?

P

Peter Rodino 12:43

My education in Newark was at Seventh Avenue School, McKinley. And from there, on to I graduated at a very early age, and graduated at a time when Barringer was not able to receive us for admission Barringer High School, was the Barr- was the school I wanted to go to. But instead because we graduated in February, I think the term was not, the term had already started so I couldn't get into Barringer, I went to Central High School. I went there for a period of time. I think about six months. Well, I don't mind saying that. When I went to Central High instead of going to school like a lot of the others why I was I was playing hooky along with a bunch of my other friends and, and despite that, I was doing very well like grade wise. I was getting good grades. I thought that you know, it was great. I didn't have to go to school every day until I finally transferred to go to Barringer. And even though I had good grades at Central High when I got to Barringer reality struck me, you know because I hadn't gotten, you know the background and I learned that I had to apply myself and it was it was tough going at the beginning. But I went through the normal course.

G

Gordon Bishop 14:22

Was the quality of education good?

i

14:24

I believe the quality of education was excellent. I remember some of the teachers that I had, who impressed me greatly. A Miss Clooney I remember all the way back now this is Seventh Ave who was my mathematics teacher, you know. And I remember that there were many of

those who I guess either weren't doing what they were supposed to do and at that time, you know they didn't spare the rod and you got your you had to get your hand out and get slapped, you know, by the ruler, you know, and there was this Miss Clooney, but everybody while they were, you might say a little afraid of her. But nonetheless, she got good results. Then there was a Ms. Barrett, whom I remember who was one of my teachers out there in McKinley School and she was in my very earlier years, I guess, prior to getting to the eighth grade, she was one who impressed me greatly and seemed to look upon me as her pet. And I tried to impress, you know, and as a matter of fact, went along. And strangely enough, and this would be of interest to you. Before graduating grammar school, my sister who is a year or two, my senior, while she's a bright girl, and all but for some reason or other, my sister just seemed to have fallen back or I had been skipped up skipped to another class. And I and my sister were in the same classes, you know, and this was always something that was pointed out by the teachers and the teachers would point to me is, you know, the pet and someone who was doing well, and I did well and I became involved too. I recall doing at that time, and this is very interesting, part of the pageants that would take place in the school, and I was the drummer boy in the Spirit of 76. This stands out very vividly. And my sister at that time, who was quite talented too, my sister was doing I think a bit the portrayed a Japanese, you know, a Japanese girl, and I remember her with her kimono. And this was one of the big presentations, that was one of the big presentations at McKinley auditorium, and lots of people used to used to attend, you know, the families were all involved. And this was part of all that went on at that time. I was part of the group that that helped to write the Tattler, that was the school paper at that time.

P

Peter Rodino 17:40

I recall, too at that time, Mr. Jones, Mr. Jones, was our physical ed teacher. And I'm going back to just prior to just during World War Two, when American got in to World War Two, and Mr. Jones, I will never forget him coming before the audit cutting before the full assembly, and, and telling us that he was going away. And I remember, I was part of the pageant then too. I'm singing, "Over there, over there", you know, "The Yanks are coming." And this is all part of that, part of my recollection of that early childhood, you know, and it was, in my opinion, a time that one really got the feel of neighborhood. People around their close and family, when family relationships counted a lot. When people helped each other greatly, for instance, during the season when, as was the custom in neighborhoods where there were, [?] Italians, Italians who had migrated here, and they would press their own grape and prepare their own wines. And this was about October season. And I remember that the families would all pitch in and the neighbors would come and help to press the grape you know, and help to prepare the wine and I remember that after the wine had been fermented for a period of time, all would pitch in and you would go first to the Rodinos, then you'd go to the Gerards and the kids would have a great time, you know. And one very interesting episode I guess, this would be of interest to you, way back then, this is living there in in that neighborhood on Seventh Avenue and we used to have as you know, this was, you know, these cold flats with the toilets outside on the porches, you know, and the old, the old stove cold stove, you know, that we'd have. And I recall during that period of time, when, as I said, many of the families were related who lived in that neighborhood. And I had I have recollection of my, one of the one of the people who was my godfather. And he had also, along with my father and the others, then gotten together and they had prepared for some wine, you know, and I remember they were fermenting their wine, and they had grapes in these barrels, you know, and the grapes were fermenting, and then they would come and they would draw off the wine, you know, and they would leave the wine in these vats, half, they were half vats, you know, and they would leave them downstairs for a period of time. And I recall that I, like a lot of others used to like to get some of that fresh

grape. So I went down to the cellar, this time, and it was dark in there, I thought I could find my way around. And I went to get some grape, you know, take some grape, and, of course, I wasn't supposed to do this, but I did. And then suddenly, I hear somebody coming in there, you know, and with a candlelight, and I wanted to back away, and as I'm backing away, because I don't want them to see me, you know, suddenly the candlelight just about gets there and somebody says in Italian, you know, "Who's there?" And as I'm going back, plop I go into the vat of wine into the wine, you know, and oh, I recall, you know, of course, crying out there, you know, but I remember my godfather saying to me, all right, and he told my father afterwards, don't worry about it, the wine is going to be that much better, because because of this. Well, at this time, incidentally, as I said, my mother died early on. I was about four and a half years old when she died. So I had a stepmother. My mother died of tuberculosis. And at that time it was called consumption, you know, galloping, you know. And I remember her very frail and very delicate looking fragile type of person, you know, and my mother always made course a great impression on me, I might say, and this may be a little something you'd be interested in hearing that before she died. We used to, as I recall, as a family, go to the -- well, I guess I don't recall this but my father recalled for me -- and we used to go to the so called Piazza the plaza down on what is what is now near the church, St Lucy's Church, which is down on a place called Sheffield street. But the old church used to be there too. And on on days when we would celebrate certain festive days, the feast days of certain saints, the bands would come and they would play they would march through the streets in a procession and people would follow, you know, especially those who would be looking for the Saints to somehow carry out an appeal that they had made. And at night there would be these bands that would play on the bandstand these orchestras, you know. And the people would gather in that Piazza, so called Plaza. And I recall my father telling me that he used to take us there along with my mother. And my mother would say, my mother apparently said to my father on a number of occasions, and my father would tell me this, that I would be helping along or mimicking the conductor. You know, my mother said what I suppose every mother says, of a son, "Look after him because he's going to be a great man." And I, I kept that thought in mind, you know, that my mother, my mother had said this of me, and it was sort of inspirational to me. I dwelled a great deal on the fact that you know, my mother died rather early and, and of course, we were a closely knit family. And my stepmother, who was Italian also, incidentally, my mother, my mother, Margaret was born in America, was born in Newark, as well, you know, and but my stepmother was Italian at birth, very, very learned person very intelligent and helped me along, so that I learned how to read the Italian newspaper, which used to come into my home the Il Progresso, you know, and converse with her in Italian and converse with them. I got to be rather fluent in the community and, and it helped me a great deal later on.

G

Gordon Bishop 25:47

How important was religion and church? To you?

P

Peter Rodino 25:52

Oh, it was very important. As I said, the, the rectory was right across the way from where we lived, and the church was down the street, Saint Lucy's Church. And, of course, my father had, had taught us that religion was important. I went to catechism as a very young man, in order to prepare myself for Holy Communion and for Confirmation.


**G** Gordon Bishop 26:21  
Altar boy?


**P** Peter Rodino 26:22  
And I served as an altar boy, for period of time, and I'll never forget, I was so impressed with what we were learning, and, you know, believed wholeheartedly and I saw other people who were older than me who were attending catechism, who were fine people and I regarded highly and I was impressed. And I remember that just before receiving Holy Communion. As you know, one goes to confess oneself just before receiving Holy Communion and, and one is absolved after making one's penance. You know, and I remember that I counted the Holy Communion and or I'd gone to confession and was going to be prepared for Holy Communion. And I recall this very vividly that somehow or other I got into some altercation with someone, you know, not physical or anything. But I, I said some things that I felt I shouldn't have said, and maybe even uttered some curse words, you know. And, you know, to me, I had, I had violated something fundamental and basic, I could no longer receive Holy Communion, you know, in that state, I was not in a state of grace. So I went to the priest, I went there to Father Ruggiero at that time. I went back and stated that I had, again, you know, sinned. And this was the kind of this was the kind of upbringing that I had. My father, of course, was a man of great, great inequalities[?]. First of all, he was a kind man, he was a good man, a very decent man. I learned from him that it was fundamental, to be honest, and to be kind, and to be, above all, a person with honor and that the material things while important, were not the most important things. That one had to command respect and to, had to live among people, you know, and to befriend them and do the kind things and the decent things. And this was my father, you know, and this was my father's teachings, and they stayed with me. And


**G** Gordon Bishop 29:04  
Your father your model,


**P** Peter Rodino 29:06  
Oh, yes, my father undoubtedly because going to ahead a little bit, I remember that, even during the, during the time when we were going to begin our debate on impeachment, I recall that my father had to say of me, and I recall sitting right here. And the speech that had been drafted, you know, along with some of the part of the some of the instructions that I had given, I remember that I sat here, hours before and, and I recall that my father had to say to me, and I said, I had to say those things. And I had to, I had to include them and I included them, you know, decency and fairness and how we ought to respect one another, you know, and I thought this was an important ingredient. And then, and about living with honor among people and the Justinian code, you know, which I had learned. And that was all part of that upbringing at that time. And he taught me along with my mother, my stepmother then, to read the Italian papers, you know, and, and that taught me the importance of an education. And and it served me well.


**G** Gordon Bishop 30:31


 Gordon Bishop 30:31  
Because you had a Bible here earlier.

 Peter Rodino 30:33  
Yes, it's, it's there. And it's matter of fact, it's a Bible that was presented to me by Billy Graham, came in here one day to talk with me. Just prior to the, prior to the debate, but during the impeachment inquiry, you know, we exchanged some ideas.

 Gordon Bishop 30:59  
When did you begin to become aware of changes in your community?

 Peter Rodino 31:04  
Oh, I think that must have been the period immediately really following, following the war, really, in 46, when I came back, I mean, when the changes that were really changes, you know, the, the drastic changes. That's when I saw, first of all, the, in migration of people from the South, and I saw an exodus of other people, and and the people who had been part of the community, were already moving out, were moving elsewhere. People, well, first of all, we've got to remember that we, I suppose, we're, you know, first generation. And as we acquired an education, and moved on, families began to move on out, finding other places to live in, and wasn't that they went too far. But when I'm talking about now changes, so the changes immediate- take place immediately take place, in that, in that area where I lived in, you know, the First Ward, but they began to go on outside, you know, people began to go into the Forest Hills section, or to Belleville, or to Bloomfield, or some places immediately around there. And I think that movement was taking place, because they were being trained, education sort of paying off, and they were moving out and improving their lot. Because that immediate neighborhood that I lived in, had lots of tenements, although it was, it was always, I think, first rate insofar as cleanliness was concerned, and so far as having streets that were clean and streets that one was, one was proud of, you know, but nonetheless, I talked about coldwater flats, and I talked about the, you know, the stoves, the cold stoves, you know, and I talked about having toilets outside, you know, so, you know, now people were beginning to find a profession and beginning to move out with their families.

 Gordon Bishop 34:08  
Did it have anything do with what was coming in, but- were there opportunities in the cities, for those in [the professions?] to stay to remain in the cities?

 Peter Rodino 34:16  
Oh, I think yes, still at that time, because I recall that during the period of time, even before before my coming back, there were many of the many of the young men who, for instance, had become doctors and lawyers who practiced right in the communities. But as they began to



improve, you know, their and the livelihood was such that their income was better, then they began to find opportunities outside as well. They began to spread out. And I think this is how we found that this migration outside. And at the same time, then as they were going out, there was some in-migration of the Blacks. And then again in areas, for instance, in the area, we talk about the Weequahic section, you know, that I recall, where I had campaigned in that area, in 1940 when I was a candidate for the assembly, a Democratic candidate for the assembly and ran on a ticket that was doomed to lose. Because while we were running under the banner of Roosevelt, nonetheless, the county was 50 to 75,000, Republican. And, and I recall campaigning in the Weequahic section, which was, you know, Democratic, a powerful Democratic stronghold, and those beautiful homes, you know, that were there. But those homes then had been vacated, ou know, by the time I got back a lot of them. Yeah, right.

G

Gordon Bishop 36:16

Why did you decide to get into politics? What was the catalyst? What do you think, got you to get involved in the local scene?

P

Peter Rodino 36:24

I suppose I could say that. I always had a deep feel for you know, my fellow man. I suppose this this upbringing that I talked about my father talking about being kind and doing what you could for others, I suppose that stayed with me and I saw things in terms of what could I do? First, I wanted to be a doctor, because I thought I might, I might be helpful to society, I might be a good surgeon, I might be a good, good practitioner, you know, to help people with their, fight off disease. And I thought of this course, that wasn't that come about, because while I did originally think of wanting to become a doctor, when I graduated high school, which was in '27. You know, we just were beginning to feel, you know, that around the corner, there might be something that was going to be the Depression, you know, and my father I found didn't have the wherewithal, you know, to send me to college. And he had, at that time, as I recall, had a little investment in stocks, and he had lost, you know, and, and he made it clear to me that, you know, I just couldn't then go to college, and that I had to work for a while. So I went to work for a while I went to work with Public Service I went to work up at the carbines(?) on in the Roseville section of Newark, where I was a clerk, you know, for a couple of years, but always with the thought in mind that I'd earn enough money to go to school, go to college. That's right, Public Service Electric and Gas and I worked there even afterwards. And, uh, getting, getting back to why why I felt, you know, this great urge this great desire and, and at this time to while I was thinking of wanting to be a doctor, I wanted to write and I thought in terms of, you know, what can I do, what can I do for others, and then in 1940, 1940 the local Democratic leader in the ward, he learned about me. During this time, incidentally, going back a little bit, I had been conducting classes, at the YMCA, citizenship classes in the neighborhood, for people, for people who wanted to learn the Italians who come in and who weren't, weren't able to speak the language and I tried to help them along we had these clubs and I would conduct these classes. And, and as a result, you know, I felt that this was a thing to do. And I guess I came into touch with the local Democratic leaders who had course learned about me and my doing these things and that I would always meet with groups of people and talk about the need to do for the poor and the disadvantaged, you know, and I suppose I expressed myself and expressed myself rather well at that time for, for the kind, you know, when you consider the kinds of education we had in that area. Not many people had been able to go to college, not many people learned



the King's English, you know, and I, as I told you, I was deep in books, you know, and reading Shakespeare, and I expressed myself rather well. And, and so I suppose, impressed that Democratic leaders. And I'll never forget, I was called over to the old First Ward, Democratic Club, by this leader, and I was asked whether or not I wouldn't want to serve on the Democratic Assembly, ticket as a candidate for the Assembly. And I thought about it. And, of course, I was impressed with, with President Roosevelt, naturally, who had, for me, great appeal, I remembered him as the as the person who made the nominating speech for Alfred Smith, as the Happy Warrior. And this impressed me a great deal. And and I recall that all of these things were for the people who were the disadvantaged in those who came out of the neighborhoods that I came out of, and I felt that this was an opportunity. So I accepted. And I became a candidate, Democratic candidate for the Assembly. And, of course, taking it very seriously, despite the fact that I knew that the county was a county that went Republican and you could hardly win. And the only time they had gone Democratic was, I think, in '36, when Roseville won, in that landslide. And there were a few assembly few Assemblymen from that area who had won as Assemblyman, the Democratic ticket, but since then, there hadn't been. And I thought, well, I'd go about and I, I'd go about talking to the voters, and I did, I took it very seriously. And I learned how to present a speech, to appeal to an audience, you know, and to say things that, however, to me, even then, even then, the local scene didn't really, you know, have much appeal, you know, to me, it was, the big arena, you know, what President Roosevelt was talking about, about feeding the hungry and providing for those who did- who had needs and the the old clothed, and the old sheltered, and the you know, the ill housed, as he spoke of. And these were the things that impressed me and I went around talking this way and, and I recall that while I was one of 12, who ran and who didn't win, nonetheless, I came high man on the totem pole, and impressed some of the people you know, in the party. And lost however.

G

Gordon Bishop 43:37

One of your few failures.